# The Wreckers

By FRANCIS LYNDE



CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

—15—

"Where—whereabouts are we, Jimmie?" she asked.

Before I could open my mouth the black shadows of the crooked valley beyond the switch were shot through with the white, shimmering glow of a headlight beam, and a second later the special flicked into view on the curve of approach.

As we looked, there was a short, sharp whistle yelp, the brakes gripped the wheels, the one-car train, with fire grinding from every brake-shoe, came to a jerking stop a short car-length on our side of the switch, and a man dropped from the engine step to go sprinting to the rear. And it was plain that neither the engineer nor the man who was running back saw our outfit waiting on the leg of the old "Y."

Kirgan was the first one to understand. With a shout of warning, he jumped and ran toward the stopped train, yelling at the engineer for God's sake to pull out and go on. Back in the hills beyond the curve of approach another hoarse murmur was jarring upon the air, and the special's fireman, who was the man we had seen jump off and go running back, and who, of course, didn't know that we had our man there, was apparently trying to reach the switch behind his train to throw it against the following engine to shoot it off on the "Y."

By this time the boss was off of our engine and racing across the angle of the "Y" only a little way behind Kirgan. He realized that his plan was smashed by the stopping of the special, and that the very catastrophe we had come out to try to prevent was due to happen right there and then. Whatever our man waiting at the switch might do, there was bound to be a collision. If he left the points set for the main line, the wild engine would crash into the rear end of the stopped special; and if he did the other thing, our engine and coach standing on the "Y" would get it.

"Get the people out of that car!" I heard the boss bellow, but even as he said it the pop-valve of the stopped engine went off with a roar, filling the shut-in valley with clamorings that nothing could drown.

Two minutes, two little minutes more, and the sleep-sodden bunch of men in the special's car might have been roused and turned out and saved. But the minutes were not given us. While the racing fireman was still a few feet short of the switch the throwing of which would have saved the one-car train only to let the madman's engine in on our engine and coach, and our man—already at the switch—was too scared to know which horn of the dilemma to choose, the end came. There was the flash of another headlight on the curve, another whistle shriek, and I turned to help the major take Mrs. Sheila off our car and run with her, against the horrible chance that we might get it instead of the special.

But we didn't get it. Ten seconds later the chasing engine had crashed headlong into the standing train, burying itself clear up to the tender in the heart of the old wooden sleeper, rolling the whole business over on its side in the ditch, and setting the wreckage afire as suddenly as if the old Pullman had been a fagot of pitch-pine kindlings and only waiting for the match.

If I could write down any real description of the way things stacked up there in that lonesome valley for the litle bunch of us who stood aghast at the awful horror, I guess I wouldn't need to be hammering the keys of a typewriter in a railroad office. But never mind; no soldier sees any more of a battle than the part he is in. There were seven of us men, including the engineer and fireman of the special, who were able to jump in and try to do something, and, looking back at it now, it seems as if we all did what we could.

That wasn't much. About half of the people in the sleeping-car—six by actual count, as we learned afterward—were killed outright in the crash or so badly hurt that they died pretty soon afterward; and the fire was so quick and so hot that after we had got the wounded ones out we couldn't get all of the bodies of the others.

As you'd imagine, the boss was the head and front of that fierce rescue fight. He had stripped off his coat, and he kept on diving into the burning wreck after another and yet another of the victims until it seemed as if he couldn't possibly do it one more time and come out alive. He didn't seem to remember that these very men were the ones who had been trying to ruin him—that at least once they had set a trap for him and tried to kill him. He was too big for that.

After we had got out all the victims we could reach, there was still one more left who wasn't dead; we could hear him above the hissing of the steam and the crackling of the flames, screaming and begging us to break in the side of the car and kill him before the fire got to him. Kirgan had found an ax in the emergency box of our day-coach, and was chopping away like a madman.

The minute he got a hole big enough, the big master-mechanic dropped his ax and climbed down into the choking hell where the screams were coming from. Our fireman picked up the ax and ran around to the other side of the wreck where Jones, the engineer of the special, and his fireman were trying to break into the crushed cab of the 416.

The old major, the boss, and I stood by to help Kirgan, and the minute his head came up through the chopped hole we saw that he needed help. He had pried the screaming man loose, somehow, and was trying to drag him up out of the smoking furnace. It was done, amongst us, some way or other. Kirgan had wrapped the man up in a Pullman blanket to keep the fire from getting at him any worse than it already had, and as we were taking him out the blanket slipped aside from his face and I saw who it was that the master-mechanic had risked his life for. It was Hatch, himself, and he died in our arms, the major's and mine, while we were carrying him out to where Mrs. Sheila was tearing one of the Pullman sheets that I had got hold of into strips to make bandages for the wounded.

With the chance of saving maybe another one or two, we couldn't stay to help the brave little woman who was trying to be doctor and nurse to half a dozen poor wretches at once. But she took time to ask me one single breathless question:

"Have they found him yet?—you know the one I mean, Jimmie?"

"No," I said. "They're digging away at that side now," and then I ran back to jump in again.

Though the fire was now licking at everything in sight, Kirgan, who had taken the ax from our fireman, had managed to cut some of the car timbers out of the way so that we could see down into the tangle of things where the cab of the 416 ought to have been. There wasn't much left of the cab. The water-gauge was broken, along with everything else, but in spite of the reek of smoke and steam we could see that Hogan and his fireman were not there. But down under the coal that had shifted forward at the impact of the collision we could make out the other man—the murder-maniac—lying on his back, black in the face and gasping.

That was enough for the boss. It looked like certain death for anybody to crawl down into that hissing steam-bath, but he did it, wriggling through the hole that Kirgan had chopped, while two or three of us ran to the little creek that trickled down on the far side of the "Y" and brought back soaking Pullman blankets to try to delay the encroaching fire and smother the steam-jets.

I couldn't see very well what the boss was doing; the smoke and steam were so blinding. But when I did get a glimpse I saw that he was digging frantically with his bare hands at the shifted coal, and that he had succeeded in freeing the head and shoulders of the buried man, who was still alive enough to choke and gasp in the furnace-like heat.

Kirgan stood it as long as he could—until the licking flames were about to drive us all away.

"You'll be burnt alive—come up out of that!" he yelled to the boss; but I knew it wouldn't do any good. With Collingwood still buried down there and still with the breath of life in him, the boss was going to stay and keep on trying to dig him out, even if he, himself, got burned to a crisp doing it. Loving Mrs. Sheila the way he did, he couldn't do any less.

It was awful, those next two or three minutes. We were all running frantically back and forth, now, between the wreck and the creek, soaking the blankets and doing our level best to beat the fire back and keep it from cutting off the only way there was for the boss to climb out. But we could only fight gaspingly on the surface of things, as you might say. Down underneath, the fire was working around in front and behind in spite of all we could do. Some of it had got to the coal, and the heavy sulphurous smoke was oozing up to make us all choke and strangle.

Honestly, you couldn't have told that the boss was a white man when he crawled up out of that pit of death, tugging and lifting the crushed and broken body of the madman, and making us take it out before he would come out himself. We got them both away from the fire as quickly as we could and around to the other side of things, Kirgan and Jones carrying Collingwood.

The poor little lady we had left alone with the rescued ones had done all she could, and she was waiting for us. When we put Collingwood down, she sat down on the ground and took his head in her lap and cried over him just like his mother might have, and when the boss knelt down beside her I heard what he said: "That's right, little woman; that's just as it should be. Death wipes out all scores. I did my best—you must always believe that I did my best."

She choked again at that, and said: "There is no hope?" and he said: "I'm afraid not. He was dying when I got to him."

I tried to swallow the big lump in my throat and turned away, and so did everybody else but the major, who went around and knelt down on the other side of Mrs. Sheila. The wreck was blazing now like a mighty bonfire, lighting up the pine-clad hills all around and snapping and growling like some savage monster gloating over its prey. In the red glow we saw a man limping up the track from the west, and Kirgan and I went to meet him. It was Hogan, the missing engineer of the 416.

He told us what there was to tell, which wasn't very different from the way we'd been putting it up. They—Hogan and his fireman—hadn't suspected that they were carrying a maniac until after they had passed Bauxite and Collingwood had told them both that what he wanted to do was to overtake the special and smash it. Then there had been a fight on the engine, but Collingwood had a gun and he had threatened to kill them both if they didn't keep on.

"I kep' her goin'," said the Irishman, "thinkin' maybe Jonesy'd keep out of my way, or that at the lasht I'd get a chanst to shut the 'Sixteen off an' give her the brake. He kep' me fr'm doin' it, and whin I saw the tail-lights, I pushed Johnnie Shovel off an' wint afther him because there was nawthin' else to do. Johnnie's back youndher a piece, wid a broken leg."

Just then Jones, the special's engineer, came up, and he pieced out Hogan's story. The wire to Bauxite had warned him that a crazy man was chasing him and overrunning stop-signals. He had thought to side-track the chaser at the old "Y" and that was what he had stopped for.

Thereupon the three of us went after the crippled fireman, and when we got back to the "Y" with him it was all over. Collingwood had died with his head in Mrs. Sheila's lap, and the boss, fagged out and half dead as he must have been, was up and at work, getting the wreck victims into our day coach, which had been backed up and taken around to the other leg of the "Y" to head for Portal City.

When it came time for us to move Collingwood, Mrs. Sheila pulled her veil down and walked behind the body, with the good old major locking his

"I Shall Always Believe That You Are One of God's Own Gentlemen."

arm in hers, and that choking lump came again in my throat when I remembered what Collingwood had said to the boss the night he came to our office: "Sheila made her wedding journey with me once, when she was just eighteen. The next time she rides with me it will be at my funeral."

I guess there's no use stretching the agony out by telling about that mournful ride back to Portal City with the dead and wounded. We left the wreck blazing and roaring in the shut-in valley at the gulch's mouth because there wasn't anything else to do; Kirgan and Jones and one of the firemen handled the engine and pulled out, while the rest of us rode in the day-coach and did what we could for the suffering.

At Banta we made a stop long enough to let the boss send a wire to Portal City, turning out the doctors and the ambulances—and the undertakers; and though it was after three o'clock in the morning when we pulled in, it seemed as if the whole town had got the word and was down at the station to meet us.

I couldn't see Mrs. Sheila's face when the major helped her off at the platform; her veil was still down. But I did hear her low-spoken words to the boss, whispered while they were carrying Collingwood and Hatch, and two of the others, who were past help, out to the waiting string of dead-wagons.

"I shall go east with the body tomorrow—today, I mean—if the strikers will let you run a train, and Cousin Basil will go with me. We may never meet again, Graham, and for that reason I must say what I have to say now. Your opportunity has come. The man who could do the most to defeat you is dead, and the strike will do the rest. If I were you, I should neither eat nor sleep until I had thought of some way to take the railroad out of the hands of those who have proved that they are not worthy to own it."

I didn't know, just then, how much or little attention Mr. Norcross was paying to this mighty good, clear-headed bit of business advice. What he said went back to that saying of hers that they might never meet again.

"We must meet again—sometime and somewhere," he said. And then: "I did my best: God knows I did my best, Sheila. I would have given my own life gladly if the giving would have saved Collingwood's. Don't you believe that?"

"I shall always believe that you are one of God's own gentlemen, Graham," she said, soft and low; and then the major came to take her away.

CHAPTER XX

P. S. L. Comes Home

By nine o'clock the next morning, as soon as I'd swallowed a hurried bite of breakfast in the grill-room I swiped a camp-stool and a magazine out of the lounge and trotted upstairs to plant myself before the boss' door, determined that nobody should disturb him until he was good and ready to get up.

He turned out a little before twelve, looking sort of haggard and drawn, of course, and having some pretty bad burns on the side of his neck and on the backs of both hands. But he was all there, as usual, and he laid a good, brotherly hand on my shoulder when he saw what I was doing.

"They don't make many of them like you, Jimmie," he said. And then: "Have you any news?"

I had, a little, and I gave it to him. Fred May had come tip-toeing up into my sentry corridor about ten o'clock to tell me that Mr. Perkins had arranged with the strikers to have a special go east with the major and Mrs. Sheila and Collingwood's body to catch the Overland at Sedgwick; and I told the boss this, and that the train had been gone for an hour or more.

Also, I gave him a sealed package that a strange boy had brought up just a little while after May went away. We took the elevator to the grill-room for something to eat, and at table Mr. Norcross opened the package. It contained a bunch of affidavits, eleven of them in all, and there was no letter or anything to tell where they had come from.

He handed the papers over to me, after he had seen what they were—sort of frowned across the table at me and said: "Do you know what it means—this surrender of those bribe affidavits, Jimmie?"

I said I guessed I did; that Hatch being dead, and Collingwood, too, there wasn't nerve enough left in the Red Tower outfit to keep up the fight; that the surrender of the affidavits was a kind of a plea for a let-up on our part.

"We'll begin to show them, in just about fifteen minutes, Jimmie," was the short comment. "Reach over and get that telephone and tell Mr. Ripley and Mr. Billoughby that I want them to meet me at my office at half-past twelve. Any news from the strike?"

"Nothing," I told him, while "Central" was getting me Mr. Ripley's number. "Fred May said it was going on just the same; everything quiet and nothing doing, except that the wrecking train had gone out to pick up the scraps at Timber Mountain 'Y.' Kirgan is bossing it, and the strikers manned it for him."

Nothing more was said until after I had sent the two phone messages, and then the boss broke out in a new spot.

"Has anything been heard from Mr. Van Britt?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

Again he gave me that queer little scowl across the table.

"Jimmie, have you found out yet why Mr. Van Britt insisted on quitting the service?"

I guess I grinned a little, though I tried not to.

"Mr. Van Britt is one of the best friends you've got," I said. "He thought you needed this strike, and he wanted to go out among the pay-roll men and sort of help it along. He couldn't do a thing like that while he was an officer of the company and drawing his pay like the rest of us."

"I might have known—he as good as told me," was the reply, made kind of half-absently; and then, short and quick: "How's the stock market? Have you seen a paper?"

I had seen both papers, at breakfast-time, but of course they had nothing startling in them except a last-minute account of the wreck at Timber mountain "Y," grabbed off just before they went to press. They couldn't have anything later from New York than the day before. But Fred May had tipped me off when he came up to tell me about the Major Kendrick special. The newspaper offices were putting out bulletins by that time.

I told Mr. Norcross about the bulletins and was brash enough to add: "We're headed for the receivership all right, I guess; our stock has tumbled to twenty-nine, and there's a regular dog-fight going on over it at the railroad post in the Exchange. Wall Street's afire and burning up, so they say."

The chief hadn't eaten enough to keep a cat alive, but at that he pushed his chair back and reached for his hat.

"Come on Jimmie," he snapped. "We've got to get busy. And there isn't going to be any receivership."

We reached the railroad headquarters—which were as dead and quiet as a graveyard—a little before Mr. Ripley and Billoughby got down. But Mr. Editor Cantrell was there, waiting to shoot an anxious question at the boss.

"Well, Norcross, are you ready to talk now?"

"Not just yet; tomorrow, maybe," was the good-natured rejoinder.

"All right; then perhaps you will tell me this: Do you, yourself, believe that four or five thousand railroad men have gone on strike out of sheer sympathy for a few hundred C. S. & W. employees, most of whom are merely common laborers? Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you haven't fomented this eruption on the quiet to get the better of the Red Tower crowd in some way?" demanded the editor.

"I can, indeed," was the smiling answer.

Cantrell looked as if he didn't more than half believe it.

"Being a newspaper man, I'm naturally suspicious," he put in. "There are big doings down underneath all this that I can smell, but can't dig up. Everything about this strike is too blamed good-natured. I've talked with half a dozen of the leaders, and with any number of the rank and file. They all grin and give me the wink, as if it were the best joke that was ever pulled off."

Again Mr. Norcross smiled handsomely. "If you push me to it, Cantrell, I may say that this is exactly their attitude toward me!"

"Well," said the editor, getting up to go; "it's doing one thing to you, good and proper. Your railroad stock is tumbling downstairs so fast that it can't keep up with itself."

"I hope it will tumble still more," said the boss, pleasantly, with another sort of enigmatic smile; and with that Mr. Cantrell had to be content.

As the editor went out, Fred May brought in the bunch of forenoon telegrams and laid them on the desk. They were quickly glanced at and tossed over to me as fast as they were read. Most of them were plaintive little yips from a strike-stricken lot of people along the Short Line who seemed to think that the world had come to an end, but there were three bearing the New York date line and signed "Dunton." The earliest had been sent shortly after the opening of the Stock exchange, and it ran thus:

"Morning papers announce strike and complete tie-up on P. S. L. Why no report from you of labor troubles threatening? Compromise at any cost and wire emphatic denial of strike. Answer quick."

The second of the series had been filed for transmission an hour later and it was still more saw-toothed.

"Later reports confirm newspaper story. Your failure to compromise instantly with employees will break stock market and subject you to investigation for criminal incompetency. Answer."

The third message had been sent still later.

"Your continued silence is inexcusable. If no favorable report from you by six o'clock you may consider yourself discharged from the company's service and criminal proceedings on charge of conspiracy will be instituted at once."

I thought things were beginning to look pretty serious for us if Mr. Dunton was going to try to drag us into the courts, but Mr. Norcross was still smiling when he handed me the last and latest telegram in the bunch. It was from Mr. Chadwick, and was good-naturedly laconic.

"To G. Norcross, G. M.,
"Portal City.

"Just returned from trip to Seattle. What's doing on the Short Line?
"Chadwick."

"A couple of telegrams, Jimmie," said the chief, as he passed this last wire over, and I got my note-book ready.

"To B. Dunton, New York. Strike is sympathetic and not subject to compromise. Mails moving regularly, but all other traffic suspended indefinitely. My office closes today, and my resignation, effective at once, goes to you on Fast Mail tonight."

"Now one to Mr. Chadwick, and you may send it in code," he directed crisply. Then he dictated:

"See newspapers for account strike. Hatch and eight of his associates were killed last night in railroad wreck. Dunton has demanded my resignation and I have given it. Have plan for complete reorganization along lines discussed in beginning, and need your help. At market opening to-morrow sell P. S. L. large blocks and repurchase in driblets as price goes down. Repeat until I tell you to stop. Wire quick if you are with us."

Just as I was taking the last sentence, Mr. Ripley and Billoughby came in, and Mr. Norcross took them both into the third room of the suite and shut the door. An hour later when the door opened and they came out, the boss was summing up the new orders to Billoughby: "There's a lot to do, and you have my authority to hire all the help you need. See the bankers yourself, personally, and get them to interest other local buyers along the line, the more of them, and the smaller they are, the better. I'll take care of Portal City, myself. I've had Van Britt on the wire and he is taking care of the employees—yes, that goes as it lies, and is a part of the original plan; every man who works for P. S. L. is going to own a bit of stock, if we have to carry him for it and let him pay a dollar a week. More than that, they shall have representation on the board if they want it. And while you're knocking about, take time to show these C. S. & W. folks how they can climb back into the saddle. Red Tower is down and out, now, and they can keep it out if they want to."

. . . . . .

I suppose I might rattle this old type-machine of mine indefinitely and tell the story of the financial fight that filled the next few days; of how the boss and Mr. Ripley and Billoughby got the bankers and practically everybody together all along the Short Line and sprung the big plan upon them, which was nothing less than the snapping up, on a tumbling stock market, of the opportunity now presented to them of owning—actually owning in fee simple—their own railroad, the buying to be done quietly through Mr. Chadwick's brokers in Chicago and New York.

There was some opposition and jangling and see-sawing back and forth, of course, but the newspapers, led by the Mountaineer, took hold, and then, pretty soon, everybody took hold; after which the only trouble was to keep people—our own rank and file among them—from buying P. S. L. Common so fast that the New Yorkers would catch on and run the price up.

They didn't catch on—not until after it was too late; and the minute Mr. Chadwick wired us from Chicago that we were safe, the strike went off, as you might say, between two minutes, and Mr. Norcross called a meeting of stockholders, the same to be held—bless your heart!—in Portal City, the thriving metropolis of the region in which, counting Mr. Chadwick in as one of us, a good, solid voting majority of the stock was now held. The Mountaineer printed the call, and it spoke of the railroad as "our railroad company"!

The meeting was held in due time, and Mr. Chadwick was there to preside. He made a cracking good chairman, and the way he dilated on the fact that now the country—and the employees—had a railroad of their own, and that the whole nation would be looking to see how we would demonstrate the problem we had taken over, actually brought cheers—think of it; cheers in a railroad stockholders' meeting!

Following Mr. Chadwick's talk there was the usual routine business; reports were read and it was shown that the Short Line, notwithstanding all the stealings and mismanagements, was still a good going proposition at the price at which it had been bought in. A new board of directors was chosen, and as soon as the new board got together, Mr. Norcross went back to his office in the headquarters, not as general manager, this time—not on your life!—but as the newly elected president of Pioneer Short Line. And by the same token, the first official circular that came out—a copy of which I sent, tied up with a blue ribbon, to Maisie Ann—read like this:

"To all Employees:

"Effective this day, Mr. James F. Dodds is appointed assistant to the president with headquarters in Portal City.

"G. Norcross, President."

That's all; all but a little talk between the boss and Mr. Upton Van Britt that took place in our office on the day after Mr. Van Britt, still kicking about the hard work that the boss was always piling upon him, had been appointed general manager.

"You've made the riffle, Graham—just as I said you would," said our own and only millionaire, after he had got through abusing the fates that wouldn't let him go back east and play with his coupon shears and his yachts and polo ponies. "You're going to be the biggest man this side of the mountains, some day; and the day isn't so very far off, either."

It was just here that the boss got out of his chair and walked to the other end of the room. When he came back it was to say:

"You think I have won out, Upton, and so does everybody else. I suppose it looks that way to the man in the street. But I haven't, you know. I have lost the one thing for which I would gladly give all the business success I have ever made or hope to make."

Mr. Van Britt's smile was more than half a grin.

"It isn't lost, Graham: it's only gone before. Can't you wait a decent little while?"

"If I should wait all my life it wouldn't be long enough, Upton," was the reply. "What you said to me—that time when we first spoke of Collingwood—was true. You said she loved the other man—and so she did."

This time Mr. Van Britt's smile was a whole grin.

"I said it, and I'll say it again. She didn't realize it or admit it, even to herself, you know; she's too good and clean-hearted for anything like that. But I could see it plainly enough, and so could everybody else except the two people most nearly concerned. I didn't mean Howie Collingwood: you were the 'other man,' Graham."

At this the boss whirled short around and tramped to the other end of the room again, standing for quite a little while with one foot on the low window-sill and making out like he was looking down at the traffic clattering along in Nevada avenue. But I'll bet a quarter he never saw a single wheel of it. When he came back our way his eyes were shining and he put his hand on Mr. Van Britt's shoulder.

"It ought to have been you, Uppy," he said, dropping back to the old college nickname. "You're by long odds the better man. When—when do you think I might venture to take a little run across to New York."

At that, Mr. Van Britt laughed out loud.

"Ho! ho!" he said. "I suppose I ought to say a year. You can wait one little year, can't you, Graham?"

"Not on your life!" rasped the boss. And then: "I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll compromise with the proprieties, or whatever it is that you're insisting on, and make it six months. But that's the limit—the absolute limit!"

And so it was.

(THE END.)

Tribute to Good Heart.

A good heart is the sun and moon, or, rather, the sun and not the moon; for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps its course truly.—Shakespeare.

How a busy man doesn't love a persistently cheerful individual who succeeds only in being noisy!